

LOVE AND LIVE
Luke 10:25-37
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"Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Not a bad question, that. In fact, it is the question asked from time immemorial. The New Testament means two things when it uses the phrase "eternal life". Sometimes it seems to indicate the reward God gives to His people after they die. This is the view which has become the popular definition of the phrase: eternal life means heaven. But there is another meaning. Sometimes the New Testament seems to be pointing to a current reality. Eternal life is a quality of life: it is a gift people may enjoy now: it breaks into the finite life of the world on occasion like a lark singing at night. "Eternal life", like "the Kingdom of God" is both future and present: death no longer defeats it: God's people know it in part in their lives, and will know it in its totality later. It is fullness of life. It is depth in the midst of superficiality: it is living to the fullest extent of one's potential. It is what, to season the sublime with the ridiculous, the Schlitz people were getting at with the phrase "You only go around once in life, so grab all the gusto you can get."

How do I find that? How do I live a meaningful, satisfying life? How can I get rid of this relentless suspicion that I'm missing something: that real life is passing me by? That's the question philosophers have tried to answer for centuries. It is the haunting question that drives the poet to write, the artist to paint. The emergence of the cults in our day is evidence that the question is being asked with a new urgency. The powerful appeal of cult religion is that it provides an immediate, simple and clear answer.

"WHAT must I do to inherit eternal life?" Not only a good question, but perhaps the best question anybody ever asked. It is, as you know, what a lawyer asked Jesus one time. The answer Jesus gave is one of the most precious stories in the literature of the human race; the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

The lawyer's job was to know and interpret religious law. Luke says he wanted to test Jesus which could mean that he wanted to see if Jesus knew the law, or that he wanted to catch Jesus in some deviation from strict orthodoxy. I think he was asking the same question each of us asks. The trouble is, you see, he knew the official answer to his own question. In fact, he was probably wearing at least a portion of it in phylactery which dangled from his wrist. It had been generations since the Rabbis condensed several statements from Deuteronomy and Leviticus into a summary of the meaning and purpose of life in covenant with God. "What's the law say?" Jesus asked him. The lawyer responded in the only way he could, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind - and your neighbor as yourself." And Jesus - who has curiously become the tester said, "Do that and you will live."

Now, there were some other people listening to this exchange and the lawyer, feeling a need to show that his purpose was legitimate, asked a second question. "Who is my neighbor?" It was another good question. Tribal mentality prescribes one kind of behavior toward fellow tribe members and another form for outsiders. At its best Judaism defined neighbor as "fellow human being". But at its narrowest Judaism defined neighbor as fellow Jew. The first century was one of the narrow times. Under the stress of foreign occupation, official Judaism had become rigid, chauvinistic. "Neighbor" was a rather limited idea.

And so Jesus told His story in response to a question - "Who is my neighbor?" but actually He was illustrating His answer to the first and fundamental question, "Teacher, how shall I inherit eternal life?"

The story is a brilliant piece of work. "A certain man", not identified as to race, religion or nationality is on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho. Jerusalem is a city on a hill: 2,000 feet above sea level. Jericho, just seventeen miles away, near the Dead Sea, is 1,000 feet below sea level. The road, therefore, is down, rocky, steep, treacherous. Until very recently it was no road to walk alone. The "certain man" in Jesus' story was attacked, beaten, robbed and left to die by the roadside.

A Priest, traveling on the same road, saw the man and made a wide circle around him, passing on the opposite side. A Levite, a minor religious official, did the same thing. Finally, a Samaritan discovered the man, bound up his wounds, took him to an inn and paid for his period of convalescence. For centuries the Jews nurtured an aversion for Samaritan people. The Samaritans had lost their racial purity through intermarriage with the Assyrians hundreds of years before. In addition they believed in only a portion of Holy Scripture. They were unclean racially and heretical theologically. And because they were really cousins the feeling between Jews and Samaritans had a bitterness about it which characterizes family feuds. No one was less likely to be used as a model of godly conduct.

The people who heard the story knew that the Priest and Levite had broken no law by walking by the man lying in the ditch. As a matter of fact, they may have precipitated a legal crisis had they stopped. The law prevented a man who had touched a dead body from participating in a religious ceremony for seven days. The man by the ditch probably looked dead. That possibility reminds me of the problems we have had with people suing those who have stopped to render assistance in emergency situations. Until recent Good Samaritan laws were enacted there appeared to be legal reason not to offer assistance particularly if you happen to be a doctor.

In any event there may have been legal and religious reasons why the Priest and Levite walked by the man. Besides, one of the oldest highway tricks in the book is to stake out a decoy and when someone stops to help, attack and rob the unsuspecting victim. Beyond that, these two were probably no different than you and I in a thousand similar circumstances. They were, quite simply, on their way somewhere else, to do important business. They didn't have time to stop. There aren't many days in my life when I don't make a decision very similar to that one. I've never been comfortable with self-righteous tirades aimed at the callousness of the Priest and Levite.

The Samaritan, on the other hand, "had compassion", Jesus said. That is, he saw a bleeding human being in the ditch, not an inconvenient interruption. He felt something besides annoyance. And he not only felt - he acted. He helped, personally, thoroughly, physically and lavishly. He quite simply stopped whatever else he was doing and gave his undivided attention and resources to another human being who needed him.

Notice that, once again, Jesus has failed to respond with precision to the lawyer's question. "Who is my neighbor?" The Parable answers that anyone who needs you is your neighbor. But the statement the Parable really makes has to do with being a neighbor. "Who", Jesus asked the lawyer, "was neighbor to the man?" Even though that isn't what he wanted to know, the lawyer had to answer, "the one who

showed mercy." Again Jesus said, "Go, and do likewise", and I believe He was still answering that initial, radical, fundamental question, "How shall I inherit eternal life?"

The magnificence of this little story is in the fact that it has so very much to say to us still, two thousand years after the fact. Just as it forced the lawyer to conclude that his neighbor was anyone who needed him, so the point is made, and must be made, in our generation. And just as the story forced the lawyer to confront his own racial and religious arrogance by posing a Samaritan as a true neighbor, so the Parable forces our hand as well. It wasn't long ago, after all, that some were seriously proposing that hungry children in Communist countries were the problem of their Marxist rulers, not ours. "Neighbor", according to Jesus, was not necessarily the person near you with whom you share a common race, religion, style of life and political persuasion. Your neighbor is whoever needs your help.

The story holds up compassion as the essential characteristic of discipleship. The Samaritan saw the man and felt something. One of the dilemmas of our life has to do with the very bigness of our cities and the institutions which we have created. Urban life, as everyone knows by now, is impersonal. We are a "lonely crowd": we become numbers on credit cards, digits in computer systems. The electronic wizardry by which we intend to propel this civilization into the future cannot cope with names and faces and feelings. Compassion is a fading virtue: it thrives in small communities where everyone knows everyone else. Archbishop of Canterbury Donald Coggan writes: "Who is my neighbor? He may be my neighbor in the sense in which we now understand the word, the person next door, the person who occupies an apartment in the same block as mine. Jesus says I am to love that person. The truth is that very often we don't even get to know them! That is why a city can be the loneliest place on earth..." (Great Words of the Christian Faith, p. 47).

In cities human problems become sociological data. . The size of the problems necessitates large, sophisticated solutions. Someone has to deal with the causes of hunger, illiteracy, unemployment. Those are complex problems, requiring the best intelligence and the most effective structures our community can provide. But someone, at the same time, has to remember and remind the rest of the community that "hunger" is not only the average nutritional level in the inner city: its real meaning is four little children who haven't eaten for three days: that unemployment means a thirty year old man who has no marketable skills and who has filled out so many applications and been turned down so many times that he has no ego left and finds his only solace and escape in television; that poverty, against which we declared a war ten years ago with our fingers crossed, and lost - is more than a socio-economic phenomenon: what it really is - is a mother of four whose apartment rent and gas bill exceed her monthly welfare check, and who can't get the attention of the Welfare Department because her telephone has been disconnected and when we call for her, she is told that her case worker resigned and she hasn't been assigned to another one yet. Someone has to remember that illiteracy is not simply never reading Shakespeare or the Bible: it means not being able to read job applications, or the bus destination, or street signs or instructions on the back of food packages. Someone must hold on to human compassion for dear life, even when and if it means bearing the cynicism of those who sneer "Bleeding hearts". Someone must remember how to laugh and to cry for the human condition.

The power of the story is, finally, in its connection with the original question. It suggests that life is available to those who know how to love. We know

a secret which we have been hiding from the world. If you want to live - really live - you have to love. Part of the reason we hide that secret is that we are terribly uncomfortable with the idea that there are rewards in religion. We discovered some time ago that rewards for good behavior tend to become ends in themselves - and that the reason for the behavior is often forgotten. I used to memorize Bible verses - not out of love of God but to win more stickers than the boy next to me. At our most analytical we have discovered that even the most noble human sacrifice sometimes feels good. We have been shocked by the psychological suggestions that some of the martyrs frankly enjoyed being martyrs. Our Reformed theologians have told us that salvation is a gift we can't earn: that God's love cannot be won: that we deserve nothing and the minute we try to deserve something we get ourselves in more trouble. We are sensitive to the hypocrisy which is possible in a religion that promises rewards for good behavior. All of which I believe and endorse. But in the process we miss, sometimes, one of the most profound teachings of Jesus; namely, that full life is the reward for loving: and that it's all right to love - that is to behave lovingly - precisely because you want to live fully.

We keep trying to base our deepest social concerns on unselfish, altruistic humanism. I bristle at the suggestion that social concern is Marxist. But we should learn that the system which sets out to liberate the masses from oppression is almost totally devoid of humanitarianism on an individual basis. In fact, it makes the individual expendable for the larger good of the state. Social humanism keeps going bankrupt, I believe, because there is a limit to our capacity for altruism. Somewhere the individual has to be convinced that it is good - feels good - to be kind, generous and compassionate. I understand that the idea borders on heresy - that it could easily become rampant selfishness.

Jesus invites us, I believe, to love the neighbor in need, because it is the way to experience eternal life: real, full, complete life the way God intends it to be lived. He said elsewhere that the way to gain your life is to lose it. That is, He did not suggest losing it as an end in itself, but rather for the reward of finding real life.

The culture in which we live needs our secret, desperately, I believe: our culture which continues to portray real life in terms of the proper deodorant, the best scotch, and the classiest automobile. Acquisition - buying, owning, using, accumulating is how this culture proposes to achieve eternal life. Jesus offered a secret - love your neighbor as yourself and you will live,

The world needs that secret. Consumerism must stop for some very practical reasons. Our six percent of the world cannot continue much longer consuming thirty and forty percent of the world's energy. If we are to survive Americans must discover an alternative to the going definition of real life. It is perhaps the most important task of the Christian Church in our time to explain and demonstrate that alternative - its secret that real life is in loving God and neighbor with kindness and generosity and extravagance.

And to us - the Parable makes a deeper suggestion that faith in Jesus Christ is authenticated and experienced only in acts of love. Helmut Thielicke writes: "May I give you a few altogether practical precepts? You will never learn who Jesus Christ is by reflecting upon whether there is such a thing as sonship in a virgin birth or miracles. Who Jesus Christ is you learn from your imprisoned, hungry, distressed brothers. For it is in them that he meets us." (The Waiting Father, p.168).

Jesus Christ meets us in the neighbor who needs us. He also, in a very real way, is the Good Samaritan. Our deepest faith is that He has come onto the road of life: that when all others have walked by He will not: that He has loved and healed and bound up our wounds and provided for our safety. "All loving." Thielicke writes, "is a thanksgiving for the fact that we ourselves have been loved." We are called to love the neighbor in need, not as duty, but in the gratitude of love. And in the promise that in loving we are given the gift of life.

Amen.

Father we confess that we have walked by those who need us. Forgive us. Forgive us for neglecting to live fully and help us to love without counting the cost. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.